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Invertebrate Conservation News



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INVERTEBRATE CONSERVATION NEWS



No. 67, February 2012

EDITORIAL

Samuel Pepys' diary might have little relevance to invertebrate conservation but a recent BBC dramatisation of his writings in the early 1660s was interesting in relation to present-day controversies over climate change. Pepys lived through a cold period, known as the Maunder Minimum, the coldest part of the much longer "Little Ice Age", when the River Thames in London sometimes froze deeply in winter. During the Maunder Minimum, it is perhaps unremarkable that Pepys recorded snow in London as early as 27th November in 1662, particularly since the date was equivalent to 8th December under our present-day calendar. Yet Pepys described the snow as "*a rare sight, that I have not seen these three years*". Perhaps three consecutive mild winters might have given the false impression that the climate was getting warmer, rather than representing a short-term fluctuation.

Extremes of weather now seem to occur remarkably often in many parts of the world. Climatologists tell us that global warming leads to an increase in extreme events but it is interesting to realise that the greatest recorded storm to hit southern Britain, in 1703, occurred during the Maunder Minimum. Since, however, single events prove nothing, it is probably too early to recognise long-term trends of anthropogenic climate change with confidence. In the meantime, however, we should take very seriously the impact that extremes of weather can have on wildlife.

Extreme natural events have always influenced the evolution and distribution of species but disturbance through human activity is a far more recent influence. We have, in many parts of the world, eliminated refugia that previously enabled species to survive extremes of weather.



Even where they persist in refugia at such times, they have less prospect of subsequently re-colonising their former habitats if these have become very few and distant. Such seems to be the plight of various endangered Australian dragonflies, as mentioned in an article in this issue of *ICN*. There is also an article about a drought in England which is resulting in unusually low river-levels, long before summer weather might start to give the land a parched appearance. Even if this drought continues into the summer, it will not stand comparison with the devastating droughts that occur in the semi-arid tropics and sub-tropics. And yet, there is cause for serious concern about species that could suffer extinction from affected wetlands.

Sadly, in a world affected by economic crisis, the need to conserve natural resources and biodiversity is all too easily ignored or inappropriately addressed. Here in the UK, politicians continue to insist that they are taking care of the natural environment. On the other hand, current government planning policy (see *ICN* No. 66) seems to open the way for the commercial development of many sites that fall short of being protected under international treaties. As mentioned in the following item on a proposed new London airport, even internationally protected sites seem to be up for grabs in some instances. Only by ignoring the need for the connectivity of habitats across the landscape, can politicians promote some of the grandiose schemes that are now being paraded as a cure for our economic ills.



NEWS, VIEWS AND GENERAL INFORMATION

Thames Estuary Airport for London?

Amid growing concern about increasing noise from air traffic in the London area, a long-dormant idea of building a new airport in the Thames Estuary to the east of the metropolis has been resurrected. The UK government intends to explore this option in a planned consultation on the national future of aviation.

At first sight, a Thames Estuary airport could be seen not only as means of easing the existing problems of aircraft noise and other pollution but also of obviating any need to expand London's busiest airport, Heathrow. The latter is often said to be at risk of losing its international 'hub' status unless a third runway is constructed there, with a consequent increase in noise, surface traffic and local land-take.



In its news bulletin of 20th January 2012, Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust points out that the Thames Estuary contains habitats of global importance for birds and dozens of endangered invertebrate species, as recognised since 31st March 2001 by the designation of approximately 5,500 hectares (13,600 acres) as a Ramsar site and a Special Protected Area (SPA). This site includes both marine and terrestrial habitats, and the marine portion is also termed a European Marine Site. The marshes extend for around 15 km along the south side of the estuary and also include some intertidal areas found on the north bank. The site encompasses brackish, floodplain grazing marsh ditches and saline lagoons as well as intertidal saltmarsh and mudflat (JNCC, 2008).

The Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar site qualifies under Criterion 2 of the Birds and Habitats Directive, as it supports one Nationally Rare and fourteen Nationally Scarce plant species, as well as one Endangered, ten Vulnerable and twelve Rare invertebrate species. It also qualifies under Criterion 5 for its internationally important assemblage of waterfowl, and Criterion 6 for its internationally important numbers of over-wintering waterfowl. Buglife comments that, while the Ramsar designation carries little legal weight, the SPA is strictly protected under the Birds and Habitats Directives. In this context, Buglife recalls that previous proposals for an airport on the North Kent Marshes were refused because the consequent ecological damage would have been illegal.

For invertebrates in the Thames Estuary, some of the most important habitats occur in flower-rich grassland, saltmarsh and bare ground. The endangered invertebrates include the Brown-banded carder bee *Bombus humilis*, Shrill carder bee *Bombus sylvarum*, White eye-stripe hoverfly *Paragus albifrons*, Saltmarsh short-spur beetle *Anisodactylus poeciloides* and Mellet's downy-back beetle *Ophonus melletii*. UK populations of these species have declined in the last 60 years and have remained under direct threat from the loss of habitat through developments such as the proposed Thames Estuary Airport.

Reference

JNCC (2008). <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/RIS/UK11069.pdf>

High Speed Rail project in England

As mentioned in the last issue of *ICN*, the AES submitted comments to a UK government consultation on the idea of building a new high-speed rail link ("HS2") from London to Birmingham, with plans for



further links to Manchester and Leeds. Although, in some respects, travel by rail can be environmentally less damaging than by road or air, the planned HS2 scheme has elicited serious concern about adverse effects on landscapes and wildlife habitats, especially in the Chiltern Hills, north-west of London.

In its submission, the AES strongly expressed concern that the consultation document purported to assess the loss of biodiversity but did so inadequately; i.e. by simply counting the officially designated wildlife sites (mainly SSSIs) that would be affected by the various options. We pointed out that, while many other ecologically important sites would be affected, their existence was not even mentioned in the consultation document. We also drew attention to a lack of environmental impact assessments, at least not in relation to invertebrates. We suggested that non-designated sites of evident value, including various ancient woodlands, should be subjected to a thorough environmental impact assessment, employing appropriate methods for the survey of invertebrates and their habitats.

The proposed route for HS2 is mostly straight, in order to enable the trains to travel at top speed. As a result, various areas of high conservation value would be bisected or otherwise affected. Thus, when answering a consultation question about the selected route, the AES argued that the selection process had failed to assess benefits and costs in a manner that could enable anyone properly to compare HS2 with other potential schemes with respect to ecological criteria. With regard to biodiversity, we reiterated that the route-selection process rested partly on a grossly over-simplified criterion; i.e. the number of officially designated sites (i.e. SSSIs) that would be affected. It was therefore wrong to claim that the process had involved an assessment of potential impacts. We added that, not only had there been a complete disregard of non-designated sites; there had not even been any attempt to measure the potential impacts on the SSSIs that were enumerated.

Turning to particular sites, the AES expressed concern about at least twenty-one ancient woods that would be directly damaged by HS2. Also, we pointed out that seventy-one woods would lie within 500 metres of the track and would therefore be subjected to adverse factors such as noise and vibration. In this context, we expressed particular concern that the line would be a barrier to the dispersal of vulnerable invertebrates and other species. Such species have very limited mobility and therefore depend on the long-term continuity of habitat that is provided only by ancient woodland and ancient trees. Some of these species are extremely rare and depend entirely on ancient and



other veteran trees, a number of which exist in the path of HS2, including some near Stoneleigh and Cubbington, Offchurch and Wormleighton in Warwickshire. We pointed out that, in northern Europe, the UK has a unique heritage of ancient trees and therefore has an international duty to protect them.

We specifically mentioned Perivale Nature Reserve in west London, which is managed by the Selborne Society, an affiliate of the AES. Part of the Reserve could be permanently lost, and there would probably be at least a temporary incursion in the Reserve during construction. Also, the green corridor that currently exists along an existing adjacent railway line would be lost, at least in the short to medium term.

In admitting that the track-bed would inevitably replace wildlife habitats, the government asserted that this loss would be mitigated by habitat creation. Also, it was claimed, correctly, that the new railway could provide a green corridor to be colonised by plants and animals, and could form connections between existing habitats. There was, however, no attempt to admit that adjacent habitats would become fragmented and degraded, both on designated conservation sites and on non-designated sites that are not even mentioned in statements that purport to quantify the loss of biodiversity. Also, we pointed out that is not possible to mitigate the loss of certain habitats (e.g. ancient woodland and ancient grassland), which have taken centuries to develop. We therefore argued that it would be entirely wrong to assert that all habitat loss can be mitigated by the creation of new habitats. We held to the principle that habitat loss should always be avoided if possible. Given that some loss would be inevitable, we proposed a thorough and honest appraisal of the potential loss.

Following the consultation, the UK Government has decided to go ahead with HS2 but there will be further consultations on matters of detail. Most of these are concerned with the designation of the zone for Phase 1 of the scheme and for providing compensation to people whose properties are blighted by the scheme. There will, however, also be a consultation on a proposed Environmental Statement for Phase 1; this is scheduled for Spring 2013. Further information can be seen at: <http://www.dft.gov.uk/highspeedrail>.

Attitudes to ragwort in the UK

In view of continuing misinformation about the risks posed by Common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* to horses and other livestock in the UK, there remains a need to dispel myths and to make people aware of



the importance of this native plant to invertebrates. One welcome move, on 21st November 2011, was the tabling of a Parliamentary Question by Andrew Rosindell, Member of Parliament for Romford, Greater London. He asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs *"what recent assessment she has made of the potential benefits of ragwort to invertebrate biodiversity"*. In reply, Richard Benyon, the Under-Secretary of State said that his Department *"... recognises that where there is no threat to animal welfare, common ragwort provides many benefits to biodiversity; in particular, it supports a variety of invertebrates, such as moth caterpillars, including the Cinnabar moth, as well as thrips, plant bugs, flies, beetles and mites."*

Mr Benyon is evidently aware of the value of ragwort, at least in the light of the information that he needed in order to answer the Parliamentary Question. It seems, however, that he might previously have been less aware, judging by some information gleaned by Neil Jones, who takes particular interest in public statements about ragwort. Neil came across a later Parliamentary Question, tabled by Paul Flynn, Member of Parliament for Newport West.

Mr Flynn's question, on 17th January 2012, concerned a scheme known as the One Day Challenge in which government ministers *"give time to help others"*. Mr. Flynn asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs *"... what volunteering (a) she and (b) other Ministers in her Department have undertaken as part of the One Day Challenge; what the nature of the work undertaken was; on what dates it took place; and what the names were of the organisations assisted"*. Mr Benyon, again replying on the Secretary of State's behalf, listed various items of work, one of which had been his own participation in the Challenge, in August 2011. He had then assisted the Friends of the Pang, Kennet and Lambourn Valleys, now part of the West Berkshire Countryside Society (WBCS), in clearing scrub and ragwort from Ashampstead Common in his Berkshire constituency. This work is recorded in Mr Benyon's website, where he is pictured next to some ragwort (or at least some yellow-flowered plants), equipped with gloves and sack (Benyon, 2011).

It is not clear whether, according to legal definitions, ragwort was posing any actionable threat to livestock at Ashampstead Common. On the other hand, the policy of the WBCS towards ragwort is perhaps represented by an article which can be downloaded from its website. The article (Dibb, 2002), states that *"everywhere it [ragwort] is regarded as a noxious weed"*. The article correctly states that majority of cases of livestock poisoning arise from ingestion of the palatable dried or wilted



material but it makes no mention of the importance of ragwort as part of the native flora, nor of its essential role as a habitat for various invertebrates. The only invertebrate mentioned is the Cinnabar moth *Tyria jacobaeae*, as the “*only natural enemy*” of ragwort, which seems “*to have little effect on the ragwort population*”. The article goes on to say that “*there is a moral duty on all owners and occupiers to prevent seed dispersal and bring this potential killer of livestock under control*”.

Ragwort is one of various plants whose flowers can provide a food source for the adults of rare insects whose larvae depend on ancient and other ‘veteran’ trees. Its role in this respect is of some interest in relation to Ashampstead Common, since the WBCS is running a veteran tree project and has so far recorded thirteen such trees on the Common; these include a yew *Taxus baccata*, estimated to be over 500 years-old and a stool of holly *Ilex aquifolium*, estimated to be over 600 years-old (WBCS, 2012).

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- Dibb (2002). Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*). <http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk/Ragwort>, Colin Dibb.pdf
- WBCS (2012). Veteran Trees for the Future. http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk/Future_Veteran_Trees_on_Ashampstead_Common_leaflet.pdf

Advice for farmers in the East of England: partnership between RSPB and Buglife

In December, the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) formed a new partnership with Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust in order to improve delivery of advice on invertebrate-friendly methods of farming in the East of England. The partnership should help to provide a ‘one-stop-shop’ for farmers, who might otherwise find it difficult or inconvenient to get advice about a wide range of types of wildlife, including rare farmland invertebrates, which Buglife has been working to protect. In eastern England, these include the Shining ram’s-horn snail *Segmentina nitida*, which found in ditches and the Large garden bumblebee *Bombus ruderratus*, which needs flower-rich meadows and wetland.



New Scottish Invertebrate Habitat Management documents

Last summer, Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust added three new documents to its portfolio of Scottish Invertebrate Habitat Management, which is being published under the *Action for Scottish Invertebrates* project with grant-aid from Scottish Natural Heritage. The new documents deal with habitats in school grounds, ponds and deadwood. Nine such documents are now available for downloading from the Buglife website (www.Buglife.org.uk). The six other documents cover cereal field margins, coastal vegetated shingle, blanket bog, lowland raised bog, grasslands and woodlands.

The school grounds document covers a range of habitat-types, including grasslands and other sources of pollen and nectar. In addition to the idea of managing pesticide-free areas of grass with different sward heights to encourage a range of flowering plants, there are suggestions for enhancing features that are often found in school grounds. For example, a chain-link fence can be enhanced both visually and ecologically by planting creepers such as wild clematis, honeysuckle and ivy. Another suggestion is to plant raised beds with aromatic herbs. There is also guidance on native trees and shrubs (for example in hedges) and on the retention of dead wood.

The ponds document includes guidance on the creation of a garden pond with features – such as gently shelving natural edges, variable depth and shelter – which will support a good range of wildlife. There are useful tips, such as the use of rainwater rather than tapwater, in order to avoid including nutrients that might favour excessive algal growth. There is also advice – familiar to entomologists but probably not to the uninitiated – not to stock a small garden pond with fish or with invasive alien plants and to avoid removing vegetation (if required) from the entire pond at one time. The advice to avoid excessive shading is tempered with useful information about the value of tree-roots in providing shelter.

In addition to the guidance on the creation and maintenance of garden ponds, there is information about the importance of other water bodies. For example, the special habitats of temporary pools can be destroyed if these are excavated to make them permanent.

The deadwood document provides a wide-ranging summary of guidance about managing the various main kinds of deadwood habitat, including fallen material (including within freshwater habitats). It even mentions relatively new techniques such as the secure re-erection of dead stems. There is guidance not only about the management of items of deadwood but also about the desirable amount per unit of



land area (e.g. 200 m² ha⁻¹ in broadleaved woodland. Management of tree populations is also covered, in relation both to the maintenance of a desirable volume of deadwood and the identification, protection and succession of veteran trees.

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- Buglife (2011). *ibid. Ponds*. Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust.
- Buglife (2011). *ibid. Deadwood*. Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust.

Drought in England

After many months of unusually dry weather, especially in the autumn, the water shortage in a large area of England is more severe than at the same stage of 1976; a year of exceptional drought. The situation might, however, not become as severe as in the summer of 1976, when hot dry weather persisted for an exceptionally long time. With regard to the longer term, the relevant government department ('Defra') warns that climate change could be a factor in the increasing demand on water supply, in combination with population increase and changing household usage patterns.

As far as invertebrates are concerned, a drought in a usually rather cool and moist climate can, within limits, favour species that thrive in hot, sparsely vegetated habitats. These include, for example, many species of Orthoptera and various Lepidoptera. On the other hand, there is serious cause for concern about wetland invertebrates, which can undergo local extinction if their habitats dry up. Some aquatic invertebrates have relatively good powers of dispersal and can therefore re-colonise areas after chance local extinction has confined them to refugia, in which they have been able to survive the adverse period. Such re-colonisation could, however, be prevented if the recovering former habitats are too widely scattered to be readily encountered by dispersing individuals. The widespread presence of unintentional decoys, in the form of artificial surfaces such as plastics and polished metal (see *ICN* No. 66), could also reduce the prospects of re-colonisation.

In January, a drought workshop was jointly organised by the Environment Agency and Natural England, with participation by conservation, angling and wildlife organisations.

Also, at the time of writing, the UK government is due to hold a Drought Summit on 20th February, bringing together a range of



organisations with roles in coping with the current drought in England and in planning for future droughts. These organisations include the water companies, the Environment Agency, Natural England, British Waterways, Met Office, agricultural bodies and environmental charities.



SITES AND SPECIES OF INTEREST

‘Rugged’ oil beetle in south-west England

Buglife and the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust have announced the discovery of a apparently strong colony of *Meloë rugosus* (the “Rugged oil beetle”) at Elliott Nature Reserve, on Swift’s Hill near Stroud. The Stroud valleys are known as a stronghold for the beetle, together with sites in the neighbouring counties of Somerset and Wiltshire but the recent record, involving an impressive eleven specimens, is welcome in view of concerns that this species has suffered a drastic decline in the UK. Buglife mentions that there is similar concern about three other oil beetles and that a four further species are now thought to be extinct in the UK.

Europe’s freshwater molluscs under threat

A review of European freshwater molluscs, published in November 2011, has revealed that they are in more serious decline than any of the other taxa currently reviewed under the Red List system (Cuttelod *et al.* 2011). The other taxa in the review have included mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, dragonflies and saproxylic beetles.

According to IUCN Red List criteria, about 44% (373 species) of freshwater molluscs were found to be threatened in Europe as a whole, as compared with 50% (273 species) in the European Union. There was also a review of selected families of terrestrial molluscs, for which the corresponding figures were 20% (246 species in Europe) and 21% (235 species in the EU only). In Europe as whole, these figures can be compared with 16% of dragonflies, 15% of saproxylic (deadwood) beetles and 9% of butterflies.

Among the most endangered of the molluscs in the review is Spengler’s freshwater mussel *Margaritifera auricularia*, still surviving in a handful of slow-flowing large rivers in France and Spain, as shown by surveys in the last ten years. Adverse influences are said to include



both direct killing and a loss of mobility and habitat, owing to dam-construction, river regulation, dredging and water pollution. The mussel requires a well-oxygenated gravel substrate, together with the presence of a suitable fish host. Its main host is believed to be the Common sturgeon *Acipenser sturio*, itself almost extinct in western Europe, but it is now thought to be capable of using another host, the River blenny *Salaria fluviatilis*. In the UK, the related Freshwater pearl mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera* also appears to be in trouble. Many of its UK populations, which are of international importance, are composed entirely of old individuals. These can reach 100 years in age but the populations will eventually die out if there is no recruitment of younger generations.

Reference

Cuttelod, A., Seddon, M. and Neubert, E. (2011). European Red List of Non-marine Molluscs. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/redlist/downloads/European_molluscs.pdf

Endangered dragonflies in eastern Australia

Many of Australia's freshwater and wetland invertebrates have evolved to withstand the periods of drought that tend to occur in a largely arid or semi-arid continent. For example, the larvae of several species of Australian Odonata have some drought-resistance and can survive temporarily in an inactive state if free water is withdrawn (Watson, 1982). There is, however, concern that an increased frequency of droughts (sometimes alternating with floods) and the destruction or degradation of habitats is threatening some of the most endangered species with extinction.

Habitat degradation is a particularly serious threat to one of Australia's largest dragonflies, which is designated as Endangered in its native state of New South Wales and is now thought to be in "immediate danger of extinction" (NSW Office of Environmental Heritage, 2011). This is the Giant Dragonfly *Petalura gigantea*, a brownish-black species with yellow markings, of which the female has a wingspan up to 130 mm. There are several other Australian *Petalura* species, all of which are under threat, including the Coastal Petaltail *P. litorea*, also in New South Wales, and the Beautiful Petaltail *P. pulcherrima* of the tropical north-east. Unlike many other dragonflies, *P. gigantea* has very poor dispersal ability and is therefore unlikely to be able to re-colonise sites following episodes of local extinction. Another factor that increases its vulnerability to human interference is



an extraordinarily long larval period, during which it requires permanent swamp conditions with a stable water-table.

The larvae of *P. gigantea* need stable conditions because – unusually among the Odonata – they are semi-terrestrial, occupying mostly submerged branching burrows but apparently also foraging for food at night amongst emergent vegetation. They are known to take at least ten years to develop and there is some evidence that they can remain as larvae for as long as thirty years. They are therefore at risk from any human activity that alters the water table, such as draining, mining, flooding or infill during their very slow development.

The permanent swamps where *P. gigantea* has been recorded (or is thought to occur) are confined to eastern New South Wales from the Victoria border northwards. Some of these lie in the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands, while a few others are coastal. One of the sites in the Southern Highlands, about 110 km south-west of Sydney, is the Wingecarribee Swamp, which has been regarded at the main stronghold of the species. Sadly, however, the swamp (believed to have existed for 10,000 years) was severely affected by a peat mining disaster in 1998.

The disaster in 1998 occurred after heavy rainfall and involved the collapse and outwash of an estimated five million cubic metres of peat via a channel that had been gouged by a drifting peat-dredging pontoon. A subsequent survey showed that a range of rare plants and *P. gigantea* had survived the disaster. The swamp was, however, described as having become fragmented and beyond any prospect of restoration to its original integrity. An area of about 140 ha was said to consist of stranded blocks of fibrous peat up to three metres in height, which were extremely vulnerable to fire and to colonisation by invasive plants (Whinam *et al.*, 2003).

Another species on the New South Wales Endangered list is the Sydney Hawk dragonfly *Austrocordulia leonardi*, which occurs in a few sites between the above area and Sydney. The threats to this species are similar to those listed for *P. gigantea*, although it depends on the presence of deep pools in rivers, rather than stable swamps. It was recently rediscovered in some sites in the Sydney suburbs (Theischinger *et al.*, 2009) but its remaining sites are so few that severe weather events, especially drought, could lead to extinction. The same is true of another species of the Greater Sydney area: the IUCN Red List Critically Endangered Adams Emerald dragonfly *Archaeophya adamsi* (Hawking & Theischinger, 2004). This is one of Australia's rarest dragonflies and is not known from any other region. Some of its remaining habitat sites are said to be under threat from development.



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Good news about mussels in Jersey

In his annual report as Conservation Officer of the Conchological Society, Dr Martin Willing recalls a happy resolution to earlier concerns about the rare snails *Truncatella subcylindrica* and *Paludinella littorina*, inhabiting joints between the granite blocks of St. Aubin's Harbour pier, Jersey. There was a need for essential maintenance but the proposed method would have destroyed the snails. Following representations during 2009, including the involvement of the press, the Jersey government acknowledged the importance of the pier for rare molluscs. A method was then devised whereby the repairs could be made within-budget but (it is hoped) without threatening the survival of the snail populations. The method involved 'stitching', whereby small-diameter holes are drilled along the pier and infilled with steel rods and grout, providing a series of solid reinforcement anchors. As far as Martin was able to ascertain, the work was completed by the end of August 2010. He has commented that the Jersey government can be congratulated for having taken the plight of these two molluscs seriously and for acted so promptly and positively.



FUTURE UK EVENTS

30 April to 4 May: Field Studies Council course: "Identifying freshwater invertebrates" at FSC, Kindrogan Field Centre, Perthshire. Tutor: Craig Macadam. Non resident £154. Accommodation available. Tel: 01743 852101. E-mail: enquiries@field-studies-council.org

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